

Japan's Security Transformation In The Dynamics The Senkaku Islands Dispute Between Japan And China (2012-2024)

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ABSTRACT

This descriptive qualitative research aims to explain the analytical results of the transformation of Japan's defense policy in 2012-2024, which was triggered by sustained pressure from China's gray-zone tactics around the Senkaku Islands and is supported by quantitative data. To analyze this, apply Hagström & Williamsson's Integrative Matrix model, which integrates the horizontal dimensions of capability (realism), policy (liberalism), and norms (constructivism) and synchronizes them with four typologies of foreign policy change to measure the multidimensional scale of policy shifts. It employs a most-likely case study design, based on the logic that if intense maritime coercion at the border fails to erode Japan's pacifist norms, domestic identity stands as an unyielding structural barrier to systemic pressures. The empirical findings reveal a partial transformation driven by a normative lag: (i) a material shift in the capability dimension by the defense budget expansion target of 2% of GDP 2027 and counter-strike capabilities; (ii) a realignment in the policy dimension, which redefined China as an 'unprecedented strategic challenge' in the National Security Strategy (NSS) 2022; and (iii) a stagnant domestic normative posture due to civil society resistance against revising Article 9 of the Constitution. It concludes that Japan's security transformation is at the level of Problem/Goal Change with Partial Normative Consolidation, indicating that changes in the capability and policy dimensions have not been fully consolidated within the domestic pacifist identity. Also, this research contributes to the theoretical debates on East Asian security by demonstrating how domestic ideational constraints persist as a structural buffer under external systemic pressures.

Keywords : Japan Security Transformation, Senkaku Island Dispute, Japan and China, Japanese Pacifism

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1. INTRODUCTION

Geopolitical dynamics in contemporary East Asia are increasingly uncertain due to competition for influence among the region's major powers. One factor driving this development is China's military modernization, marked by a consistent increase in defense spending over the past two decades (Ministry of Defense Japan, 2022). This enhancement of China's military capabilities has created a perception of threat among neighboring nations. Consequently, countries in the region are reassessing their domestic defense strategies to maintain the balance of power.

These regional security dynamics have prompted Japan to adjust the direction of its national security policy. Historically, the process of adjusting Japan's defense strategy has been linked to the principle of pacifism enshrined in Article 9 of the 1947 Constitution. This provision is a legal clause that formally binds Japan to renounce its sovereign right to maintain offensive military command and

to use armed force as an instrument for resolving international disputes (Kolmaš, 2020). The foundation of the principle of pacifism subsequently underpinned the emergence of Japan's post-war foreign policy orientation through the implementation of the Yoshida Doctrine, which emphasized economic development with security guarantees from the alliance with the United States (Hook et al., 2011). The tension between the limits of pacifism and the dynamic realities of regional security, as reflected in the escalation around the Senkaku Islands, has sparked debate over Japan's foreign policy orientation.

Under international law, the Senkaku Islands are part of Japan's sovereign territory, although private entities once held physical control of the islands following the 1895 annexation (Widiyanto et al., 2025). Therefore, Japan's policy from 2002 to 2012 of leasing the islands was a strategic move by the state to secure regional stability and counter any provocative actions by third parties (Liff, 2023).



Figure 1. Geographical Location of the Senkaku Islands
(Source: international sindonews)

Geographically, the Senkaku Islands are a group of islands on the western side of the Nansei Islands (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2013). Their strategic position at the maritime crossroads of mainland China, Japan, and Taiwan (Figure 1) places these islands within *the first island chain*, which serves as both a defensive boundary and a major shipping route in the East China Sea. However, activities around the Senkaku Islands have escalated since the Japanese government nationalized the territory in 2012 (Pelopidas, 2013). This escalation was triggered by the Japanese government's decision to purchase three islands in the Senkaku Islands from the Kurihara family for 2.05 billion yen from previously been merely a lease. This action triggered an escalation of the conflict because China viewed it as a violation of *the status quo*. Consequently, boycotts, anti-Japanese protests, and the scheduled deployment of Chinese maritime patrol fleets emerged to challenge Japanese jurisdiction (Pramaiseilla, 2023). The frequency of Chinese coast guard vessel presence in the contiguous zone of the Senkaku Islands reached 352 days of presence throughout 2023. Additionally, the duration of Chinese vessels' presence within Japan's territorial waters increased, setting a record of over 80 consecutive hours in 2023. The deployment of Chinese vessels is to toward asserting their historical claim to the Senkaku Islands, which they refer to as the Diaoyu Islands (Kemalasari, 2025). This intensive maritime pattern has influenced Japan's defense posture in safeguarding its territorial jurisdiction.

Unlike other maritime disputes limited to economic rights, the escalation around the Senkaku Islands is a dominant factor because it threatens Japan's physical sovereignty over its territorial waters. Its position on the front line of the First Island Chain makes it a crucial defensive stronghold for Japan. Therefore, losing control of this territory would grant China direct military access and threaten Japan's mainland security. In response, the Japanese government updated its defense legal framework, which implemented through the enactment of three national security documents in December 2022, during Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's tenure. In the National Security Strategy (NSS), the repeated intrusions of Chinese vessels around the Senkaku Islands identified as unilateral attempts to alter the status quo. This phenomenon is assessed as a significant strategic challenge to Japan's national security. As an operational follow-up, the National Defense Strategy (NDS) outlines strengthened coordination between the *Jieitai* Japan's *de facto* armed forces, internationally known as the Self-Defense Forces (SDF), and the Japan Coast Guard to defend the sovereignty of its outermost islands against threats of grey zone tactics. Furthermore, through the Defense Buildup Program (DBP), Japan is translating this political warning into military funding for the procurement of long-range missiles and a fleet of surveillance drones to fortify the southwestern maritime region, which includes the islands of Okinawa, Miyako, and Ishigaki, Yonaguni, and the Senkaku Islands.

The implementation of funding through the DBP is reflected in plans to raise the defense budget to 2% of gross domestic product 2027. The procurement of long range missile systems in the southwestern maritime region also marks the adoption of a counter-strike capability, shifting Japan's orientation from a defensive posture toward a stronger preventive posture (Hughes, 2024). This shift in Japan's defense posture has sparked theoretical debate with some scholars viewing it as a change in Japan's orientation toward becoming a more active actor. The first perspective views this change as a normalization of Japan's military posture to enhance its active strategic role in the region (Liff, 2023). The second perspective focus on the adoption of counter-attack capabilities which constitutes a shift toward an active deterrence doctrine as passive defense systems are no longer sufficient to address missile dynamics in the maritime region (Harold et al., 2022). Meanwhile, the third perspective argues that this policy change is a concrete response to protect territorial sovereignty in the wake of the dispute over the Senkaku Islands (Pramaiseilla, 2023).

Although this discourse has evolved, previous studies have tended to analyze Japan's security transformation in isolation and in a fragmented manner. Most previous studies have focused solely on either the material dimensions of change or institutional aspects, thereby overlooking the fact that public opinion can slow the pace of change (Liff, 2023). Thus, the author introduces a novelty in the synthesis of the Integrative Matrix model, which combines the dimensions of capability, policy, and norm changes within a single framework to analyze the escalation of the Senkaku Islands dispute. In this study, escalation is not merely a material trigger but a test of the limits of Japan's pacifism, specifically Article 9 of the Constitution. The contradiction between the urgency of defense in the Senkaku Islands and the normative foundation of pacifism constitutes the core issue of this research.

Overall, this study is grounded in the question of the extent to which Japan's security policy has transformed in response to the escalation over the Senkaku Islands during the 2012–2024 period. Thus, the study aims to analyze the extent of transformation in Japan's security policy in response to the escalation over the Senkaku Islands from 2012 to 2024. This period was selected to focus on the doctrinal shift from the Shinzo Abe administration (2012–2020), marked by the 2013 policy document update, to the Fumio Kishida era (2021–2024), which expanded the previous budget targets under an

offensive doctrine (Midford, 2025). The administration in between, that of Yoshihide Suga (2020–2021), is not the focus of this study because this administration was committed to continuing the defense policies implemented by the Shinzo Abe administration (Samuels & Wallace, 2023). This period is mapped to provide empirical evidence on the consistency of changes in Japan's security policy under Prime Minister Fumio Kishida in 2022, across capabilities, policies, and domestic norms, across the four classifications of policy change from the Integrative Matrix. To test this objective, the Senkaku Islands dispute is applied as a *most likely case study*. This design is based on the logic that if China's high intensity of maritime pressure at the border fails to alter the norm of pacifism, this study confirms that domestic identity continues to act as a structural barrier against external pressure (Hagström & Williamsson, 2009). Thus, the resulting policy change classifications can demonstrate how the integration of these three dimensions functions under external pressure from the Senkaku Islands escalation.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A. The Integrative Matrix Model (Hagström & Williamsson, 2009)

1) Definition

The Integrative Matrix Analysis Model is a methodological framework developed by Linus Hagström and Jon Williamsson (2009) to test claims of a country's defense policy transformation through a cross-paradigm (*theoretically uncommitted*) approach. This model integrates three horizontal dimensions of analysis drawn from major paradigms in International Relations with measures of the degree of change borrowed from Charles F. Hermann's (1990) classification. The combination of these two analytical instruments aims to avoid the single-paradigm bias that often dominates studies of foreign security policy.

Horizontally, this model combines three dimensions of analysis by juxtaposing the first dimension, namely, the dimension of capability change based on realism, which views the international system as anarchic. Therefore, physical and material defense readiness, such as trends in military budgets and defense equipment procurement, serves as an indicator of a state's defense capabilities. Second, the dimension of policy change applies the liberalism paradigm, assuming that domestic institutions and formal regulatory frameworks function to translate physical capabilities into official national security strategy documents and legal commitments. Third, the dimension of normative change adopts a constructivist approach because material and legal actions have no objective meaning without alignment with domestic norms, public perceptions, and media narratives that serve to legitimize them at the domestic societal level.

To measure the degree of shift across these three horizontal dimensions, the Integrative Matrix adopts Charles F. Hermann's (1990) hierarchical classification scheme regarding levels of foreign policy change as the explanatory axis (*explanandum*). This classification is adopted without including causal variables (*explanans*), such as bureaucratic dynamics or leadership, thereby keeping the analytical framework neutral, cross-paradigmatic, and not binding the researcher to a single causal explanatory pathway. The classification comprises four levels, the first level is adjustment change, characterized by quantitative changes in resource capacity without altering methods or strategic objectives. The second level is program change, marked by the adoption of new instruments or methods to address existing

security issues without overhauling the national strategic vision. The third level is problem/goal change, which represents a comprehensive redefinition of national challenge priorities and the classification of primary threats within state policy. The highest level is international orientation change, which entails a fundamental shift in the international direction, international identity, traditional alliance structures, and the definition of friends and foes. Based on the Integrative Matrix Model, a change is considered fundamental when shifts occur simultaneously across all three dimensions and at a minimum reach the problem/goal change classification.

2) Function

In this study, the integration of the three dimensions and four classifications of policy change serves as an operational instrument to empirically validate the depth of Japan's defense transformation during the 2012–2024 period. Through this integrated model, researchers can conduct cross-sectoral data triangulation to assess whether Japan's defense response to the dynamics in the Senkaku Islands is supported by legitimacy in the public sphere and legal framework or merely constitutes a temporary programmatic adjustment. Data results from this model are drawn based on the following criteria:

- a.) If there is a discrepancy in the degree of change across dimensions, then Japan's defense shift is classified as a partial transformation.
- b.) If all three dimensions simultaneously show changes with a minimum at the problem/goal change level, the transformation is categorized as a fundamental policy change.

3. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative, descriptive approach using the Most-Likely Case Study design. This approach was chosen because the study focuses on the search for intersubjective meaning, the construction of domestic norms, and the dynamics of interaction between the two countries within the reality of border security. Quantitative data is positioned descriptively as supporting material evidence to strengthen the validity of qualitative interpretations. The primary objective of the study is to gain an understanding of how border escalations can test the limits of Japan's pacifist norms, which are positioned as the most likely case. In other words, this study focuses on changes in Japanese policy driven by military escalations with China over the Senkaku Islands (Hagström & Williamsson, 2009).

Data collection was conducted by reviewing the National Security Strategy (NSS), National Defense Strategy (NDS), and Defense Buildup Program (DBP) 2013 and 2022, as well as operational data from the Japan Coast Guard (JCG) and the Defense of Japan Annual White Paper, to assess changes in capabilities and policy. Meanwhile, data on the domestic normative dimension were obtained from official surveys and national media polls, including those from the Cabinet Office of Japan, *Nippon Hoso Kyokai*, *Nikkei Shimbun*, *Asahi Shimbun*, *Yomiuri Shimbun*, *The Japan News*, and *Kyodo News*. The final data analysis involved triangulation of sources and a content analysis process integrated with the Integrative Matrix model. The analysis steps encompass three phases: data reduction, data presentation, and concluding. In the data reduction phase, all empirical evidence was filtered through three dimensions, which are capability change, policy change, and normative change. This was then mapped into four classifications of policy change, there are Adjustment Change,

Program Change, Problem/Goal Change, and International Orientation Change. Consequently, this study focuses solely on Japan's internal adjustments in capabilities, regulations, and normative perceptions.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Regarding changes in Japan's defense policy, the escalation over the Senkaku Islands is *the most likely case*, driven by systemic pressure from the increasing presence of Chinese government vessels in the contiguous zone, which rose from 121 days in 2012 to 353 days in 2024. This pressure has led Japan to align its military capabilities with national defense regulations. This alignment process is the focus of this discussion, particularly regarding Article 9 of the Constitution and its pacifist norms, which have long served as a normative constraint on national defense (Hook et al., 2011). However, the escalation of maritime tactics around the Senkaku Islands is eroding the effectiveness of Japan's traditional legal constraints. Consequently, the alignment of military capabilities is intertwined with regulatory reorientation and the dynamics of domestic normative debate. These dynamics are examined across the dimensions of Capability Change, Policy Change, and Normative Change, and then synthesized in the integrative matrix table.

Policy change dynamics are analyzed within the Capability Change dimension. This dimension adopts a realist perspective to examine the distribution of material power as a determining factor in state action within an anarchic international system. During the Cold War era, under Prime Minister Miki Takeo in 1976, adherence to the budget cap was informally maintained at 1% of GDP for four decades as a means of complying with the principle of pacifism under Article 9 of the Constitution (Akiyama, 2023). However, this target changed following the release of three national security documents in late 2022. The increase in the military budget to 2% of GDP by 2027 marks the end of the informal 1% limit. This budget increase, aligned with NATO standards, repositions Japan as the third or fourth largest military power globally, surpassing the UK and France in nominal terms (Oros, 2023). The data in the following table shows that the trend of significant budget increases is a direct implication of achieving the 2% target by 2027.

Table 1. Japan's Defense Budget

Fiscal Year	% of GDP
2012	0,95%
2013	0,93%
2014	0,94%
2015	0,93%
2016	0,91%
2017	0,89%
2018	0,94%

2019	0,97%
2020	0,99%
2021	1,03%
2022	0,97%
2023	1,10%
2024	1,29%
2025	1,41%

Source: Compiled by the author from the SIPRI Military Expenditure Database (sipri.org).

In Table 1, the author uses data from the second term of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe through the era of Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, who released three policy change documents in 2022, to examine trends in Japan's defense budget. The data show a significant increase in Japan's defense budget from the era of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2012 to that of Prime Minister Fumio Kishida in 2022. During the 2012–2022 period, military budget growth was slow as Japan remained bound by the 1% cap (Ministry of Defense, Japan, 2023). However, the release of the three 2022 security documents led to a 1.10% increase in the budget (SIPRI, 2024). This massive increase is intended to fund the procurement of new offensive-defensive military equipment approved in the national defense strategy document, specifically the 2022 *Defense Buildup Program* (DBP) (Ministry of Defense Japan, 2023). Thus, the escalation of China's naval presence in the Senkaku Islands region empirically drives a shift in Japan's defense *capabilities*, as evidenced by the increase in the defense budget ceiling to 2% of GDP by 2027.

Temporarily, China's escalation in the Senkaku Islands throughout 2022–2023 has intensified gray-zone tactics by deploying 10,000-ton coast guard patrol vessels armed with active military cannons to challenge Japan's administrative control daily. This daily pressure has forced *the Japan Coast Guard* (JCG) to conduct 24 hour patrols, thereby increasing fuel costs, fleet maintenance, and logistics personnel costs in territorial waters. As a result, Japan has proposed increasing the JCG budget to fund the procurement of new 30,000-ton patrol vessels and maritime surveillance *drones* (IP Defense Forum, 2024). Thus, the intensification of daily pressure in the Senkaku Islands not only drives up operational costs but also undermines the previous era's defense budget target of 1% of GDP. This mechanism operates through China's *cost-imposing strategy*, under which Japan must undertake greater financial reallocation to modernize the JCG and JSDF fleets.

Furthermore, the adoption of *counter-strike capabilities* is altering the types of military equipment held by *the Japan Self-Defense Forces* (JSDF). Post-war, Japan adhered strictly to the *senshu-boei* doctrine, which aimed to limit the possession of weapons to short-range defensive systems. This doctrinal provision effectively prohibited Japan from possessing missiles capable of reaching the sovereign territories of other nations. However, the modernization of China's maritime capabilities has prompted

Japan to undertake a revolution in weapons procurement capable of reaching across borders under the 2022 *Defense Buildup Program* (DBP) (Patalano, 2018). The weapon procurement decisions outlined in the 2022 DBP are listed in the following table.

Table 2. Weapons Systems in Japan's Counter-Strike Capability Component (2022–2027)

Weapon Systems	Range	Type
Tomahawk BGM-109E Block V	1.600 km	Land-attack cruise missile (LACM)
Type 12 SSM Improved (Darat)	1.500 km	Surface-to-surface / Land-attack missile
Type 12 SSM Improved (Udara)	1.500 km	Air-to-surface missile for F-15J
Joint Strike Missile (JSM)	500 km	Anti-ship / Land-attack cruise missile for F-35A/B
Hyper Velocity Gliding Projectile (HVGP)	>1.000 km	Hypersonic glide vehicle (HGV)

Source: Compiled by the author from the Japanese Ministry of Defense & the Acquisition, Technology & Logistics Agency (ATLA)

The inclusion of offensive-defensive weapon systems in the 2022 Defense Buildup Program (DBP) represents a significant shift from the senshu-boei doctrine. Consequently, this transforms the Japanese military into an active deterrence mechanism, in which the possession of long-range missiles serves to project the risk of direct damage onto enemy military bases, thereby halting daily intrusions. As a concrete step, Japan signed an official contract with the United States on January 18, 2024, to purchase 400 units of BGM-109E Block V Tomahawk missiles. Consequently, Japan became the first country in Asia to possess land-attack cruise missiles from the United States. Phased deliveries are scheduled to begin one year earlier in 2025 due to increasing daily pressure from Chinese coast guard vessels around the Senkaku Islands (Defense Security Monitor, 2025). These missiles extend the Japan Self-Defense Forces' (JSDF) range, enabling them to target military bases along China's eastern coast, including the Senkaku Islands for the first time.

The missile procurement coincides with the development of Japan's domestic missile technology, specifically the Type 12 SSM anti-ship missile system by Mitsubishi Heavy Industries. The land-based variant of the Type 12 SSM is designed to close defense gaps along the Senkaku Islands and surrounding areas with the capability to strike enemy naval bases beyond their detection range. Development is also underway on an air-launched variant for the F-15J fighter jet to expand power projection (Army Recognition, 2024). Thus, the acquisition of Tomahawk and Type 12 missiles enhances Japan's capabilities, which prior to the release of the 2022 Defense Budget Plan, were limited to a range of 500–900 km. This enhancement is the implementation of counter-strike capabilities that are transforming Japan's defensive posture. The introduction of this new operational range directly impacts the deterrent effect on China's maritime activities in the East China Sea. Additionally, the development of the Hyper Velocity Gliding Projectile (HVGP), designed to secure Japan's outermost islands by targeting enemy maritime areas. This development took place in California in March 2024 as a response to China's hypersonic missile program (The Aviationist,

2025). The entire new weapons system is intended to realize the counter-strike capability outlined in Japan's 2022 policy document, the National Defense Strategy (NDS). The adoption of this capability is evident in a counter-strike capability known as *hankogeki noryoku*, aimed at maintaining a defensive image in Japanese society, even though Japan has, in substance, been operating cross-border military capabilities that were previously taboo (Hughes, 2024).

The restructuring of Japan's military capabilities has also been accompanied by changes in the deployment of Japanese military units within Japan's maritime territory. After 2016, Japan reoriented its defense posture from an initial focus on the northern regions, namely *Hokkaido* and *Honshu*, to deploying military units in the Nansei Islands to secure the maritime areas around the Senkaku Islands (Liff, 2023). The reorientation in these outermost islands is detailed in the following table.

Table 3. Japanese Military Deployment in the Nansei Islands (2016–2023)

Island	Distance to Senkaku	Year	Personnel	Primary Weapons System
Yonaguni	150 km	2016	160	Coastal radar, Coast observation unit, <i>Electronic Warfare Unit (EW)</i>
Amami Oshima	400 km	2018	560	Type 88 SSM, Type 03 SAM
Miyako-jima	270 km	2019	700	Type 88 SSM, Type 03 SAM
Ishigaki-jima	170 km	2023	570	Improved Type 12 SSM, Type 03 SAM

Source: Compiled by the author from the Japanese Ministry of Defense

The military reorientation along the Nansei Islands between 2016 and 2023 was carried out through the construction of military bases on Japan's outermost islands, including *Yonaguni*, *Amami Oshima*, *Miyako-jima*, and *Ishigaki-jima*. The integration of radar units and anti-ship missiles (Nansei Shield) in this region serves to secure maritime chokepoints and limit the operational freedom of the Chinese military's maritime transit toward the Pacific Ocean (Rivai & Pratiwi, 2026). The military changes aim to activate Camp *Yonaguni* as a frontline intelligence and observation post for the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force (JGSDF), which operates coastal surveillance radars and electronic warfare (EW) units. In March 2016, approximately 160 personnel from the coastal observation unit were deployed to Camp *Yonaguni*. Although initially opposed by some local residents, this move was eventually supported following discussions with the local government (Stars and Stripes, 2026). The reorientation continued in April 2023 with the addition of an Electronic Warfare Unit (EW) in *Yonaguni* as a non-physical security instrument designed to degrade, disrupt, or disable communication frequencies and early-warning radar signals from foreign fleets. The deployment of EW capabilities is designed to integrate the functions of Coastal Radar and Coast Observation Units as sensor based coastal surveillance infrastructure tasked with identifying, tracking, and collecting electromagnetic intelligence data along the maritime border. The operation of these two monitoring systems on this outermost island aims to reduce the surveillance gap in the western *Okinawa* region while simultaneously mapping the operational activities of Chinese warships and fighter jets around the Senkaku Islands and the Taiwan Strait in real time. Additionally, in February 2026, the Japanese Ministry of Defense (*Bōei-shō*) announced plans to deploy the latest version of the Type 03 SAM

missiles on *Yonaguni* by 2030 to counter the threat from China (Stars and Stripes, 2026). In *Yonaguni*, annual exercises such as *Resolute Dragon 2024* were held for the first time in Japan's southwest between the U.S. and Japanese militaries. This exercise demonstrated the two nations' integrated defense in the Nansei Islands (The Diplomat, 2026).

The military presence on *Yonaguni* was reinforced in March 2019 by the construction of two additional bases on *Amami Oshima* and *Miyako-jima*, completing a layered defense pattern. *Amami Oshima* hosts approximately 560 personnel equipped with Type 88 missile systems and Type 03 missiles, marking the first deployment of anti-ship missile units along the Nansei Islands as a defense zone. Operationally, the Type 88 missile is a high speed subsonic land based anti-ship cruise missile (*surface-to-ship missile*) with the capability to fly low over the sea surface (*sea-skimming*) to neutralize enemy warships approaching the border. On the other hand, the Type 03 missile serves as a medium-range air defense system equipped with active electronically scanned array radar technology, designed to detect and destroy physical air threats, including fighter jets, cruise missiles, and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), from adversaries. The combination of these two weapon systems provides a maritime and air anti-access or area-denial (A2/AD) capability to restrict the movement of the Chinese military fleet along Japan's outermost islands (Stars and Stripes, 2026).

Meanwhile, *Miyako-jima* with its 700 personnel, serves as a key route for the Chinese Navy to enter the Pacific Ocean from the East China Sea. The presence of anti-ship missiles directly hinders China's military maneuvers. Deployment on *Miyako-jima* in 2026 strengthens Japan's ability to disrupt the communications and radar of foreign fleets transiting border waters with the Improved Type 12 SSM and Type 03 SAM. The Improved Type 12 SSM is a land-based anti-ship missile with an extended range designed to target and destroy enemy warships from a safe distance before they can approach Japanese waters. Meanwhile, the Type 03 SAM operates as a medium range air defense system tasked with both intercepting and engaging all forms of aerial threats, such as fighter jets, cruise missiles, and enemy reconnaissance drones (The Diplomat, 2026).

This layered defense is also integrated with the *Ishigaki-jima* base, which began operations on March 16, 2023. As part of the Nansei Shield network, this base serves as the closest military outpost to the Senkaku Islands, housing 570 personnel along with Type 12 and Type 03 missile systems (Liff, 2023). Following the development of the Type 12 missile in December 2025, the *Ishigaki-jima* area was prioritized as the first operational site due to its optimal geographical position for reaching the Senkaku Islands (Army Recognition, 2024). The integration of these four military bases in the Nansei Islands collectively constitutes Japan's area-denial zone. This zone restricts the operational freedom of Chinese warships and coast guard vessels around the Senkaku Islands by projecting missile attack risks (Matsuda & Ji, 2025). These restrictions on maneuverability confirm the urgency of restructuring domestic military capabilities to optimize the implementation of counter-strike capabilities in Japan's outermost island regions.

These tactical manifestations in the border region are not fundamentally isolated rather, they are rooted in the legal and formal legitimacy enshrined in the Japanese policy instruments analyzed under the Policy Change dimension. This dimension applies the liberalism perspective as an analytical filter, assuming that changes in state policy must be enshrined in formal documents that are legally and politically binding. Unlike ordinary political statements, official documents tangibly allocate resources, define institutional obligations, and create verifiable accountability. In the case of Japan's defense policy

changes, these are no longer limited to political rhetoric but have materialized in legally and politically binding formal documents. Therefore, the analysis of this dimension focuses on policy documents from the eras of Prime Ministers Shinzo Abe (2013) and Fumio Kishida (2022), as outlined in the following table. The selection of five aspects in the table is based on the analytical focus of this dimension to examine changes in Japan's policy direction, budget, and military strategy from 2013 to 2022.

Table 4. Comparison of the 2013 & 2022 Policy Documents

Aspect	Prime Ministers Shinzo Abe	Prime Ministers Fumio Kishida
Characterization of China	<i>"China's moves to strengthen its military capabilities... are matters of concern for the region and the international community"</i>	<i>"Unprecedented and the greatest strategic challenge to ensuring peace and security of Japan and the international community"</i>
Counter-strike Capability	<i>Not mentioned.</i> <i>"Japan will firmly maintain an exclusively defense-oriented policy..."</i>	<i>"Japan needs counter-strike capabilities: capabilities which, in the case of missile attacks against Japan and others, enable Japan to mount effective counter-strikes against the opponent's territory..."</i>
Defense Spending Target	<i>Not explicitly specified.</i> <i>"(Japan will) allocate necessary resources..." (implicitly maintaining the 1% GDP ceiling framework)</i>	<i>"...take necessary measures to make the budget for both the defense strengthening and the complementary initiatives reach 2% of the current GDP in FY2027."</i>
Strategic Domains	<i>"...developing seamless defense capabilities across traditional domains of land, sea, and air."</i>	<i>"Cross-domain operational capabilities... fundamentally strengthening capabilities in new domains such as space, cyber, and electromagnetic spectrum, including unmanned defense systems."</i>
Language on the Global Order	<i>"Japan will contribute proactively to peace based on the principle of international cooperation"</i>	<i>"The rules based international order is being seriously challenged"</i>

Source: Compiled by the author from Japan's 2013 & 2022 Policy Documents

The table indicates a paradigm shift in how Japan's military investments, budget, and weapons procurement will be allocated during Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's era (CSIS, 2023). Based on the first row of Table 4, the security strategy document from Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's era characterized the enhancement of China's military capabilities merely as a *"matter of concern"* for the region and the international community. This characterization was based on a primary threat focus on North Korea, while China was accommodated as the largest trading partner listed in *the 2013 National Security Strategy (NSS)*. In contrast, the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs asserts that the 2022 NSS explicitly designates China as a threat and includes the Taiwan Strait as an area of direct security interest for Japan

This shift in perspective on the mapping of adversaries was followed by the adoption of a more aggressive military doctrine than the 2013 policy document, which maintained a defensive orientation. Through the 2022 *National Defense Strategy* (NDS), Japan introduced the capability for a counterattack as an implementation of its *counter-strike capability*. This policy is first mentioned in an official Japanese document that asserts the right to attack another country's territory, although the government continues to frame it in defensive terms, using the term *hankogeki noryoku* (Hughes, 2024). The shift in terminology from “enemy base attack” (*tekichi kogeki*) to “counter-strike capability” (*hankogeki noryoku*) serves as a communication strategy to maintain domestic public support, which remains bound by the principles of Article 9 of the Constitution (Samuels & Wallace, 2023). The change in terminology serves as an elite compromise mechanism to obscure the offensive nature of new military hardware and quell public resistance, thereby allowing the expansion of security instruments to proceed without triggering a domestic legitimacy crisis.

The new doctrine was implemented through the purchase of 400 Tomahawk missiles worth ¥ 254 billion in January 2024 and the testing of seven Type 12 SSM missiles in the U.S. in December 2025 (Defense Security Monitor, 2025). Furthermore, the 2022 *Defense Buildup Program* (DBP) document marks a massive military reform, including the addition of the cyber and space domains and a doubling of the defense budget. These changes indicate that Japan's security strategy has shifted toward a problem/goal change, where Japan is not merely modifying existing defense instruments but redefining security challenges from border escalations to existential threats. Consequently, Japan's strategic objectives have shifted, as evidenced by the shift in terminology from *tekichi kogeki* to *hankogeki noryoku* in the 2022 *National Defense Strategy* (NDS).

The data in the third through fifth rows indicate changes in Japan's financial capabilities, operational limits, and geopolitical orientation under Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's administration. In terms of the budget, the 2022 strategy document explicitly sets a budget target of 2% of GDP by 2027, ending the informal adherence to the 1% GDP from the era of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Regarding operational scope, Japan's security strategy has expanded through the integration of new domains, including cyberspace, space, the electromagnetic spectrum, and unmanned systems technology. In the context of Japanese defense, unmanned defense systems refer to the operation of unmanned military equipment such as maritime reconnaissance drones and pilotless aircraft. These systems serve to automate the monitoring of high-risk border areas. Their implementation aims to safeguard territorial security without sacrificing military personnel on the ground (Ministry of Defense, 2022). This transformation is driven by a shift in Japan's perspective, which views the current international order as facing significant challenges.

However, changes in Japan's formal policies ultimately depend on the extent to which such transformations are internalized as new norms by the domestic society, as analyzed in the *section on Normative Change*. This dimension employs a constructivist perspective, arguing that a policy change is likely to be reversed if a corresponding shift in societal values does not support its measure shifts in norms within Japanese society, this study utilizes two primary sources: official government public opinion surveys and national media polls. According to a triennial survey by the Japanese Cabinet Office in late 2022, 41.5% of 3,000 respondents expressed a desire to strengthen the capabilities and size of Japan's Self-Defense Forces (*Jieitai*). This is the highest figure since the survey began in 1991 (Cabinet Office Japan, 2023). Similar results are evident from a *Nikkei Research* survey, in which public support for expanding Japan's role in the U.S.-Japan alliance rose from 46% to 49% in 2021

(Stars & Stripes, 2026). During the same period, a *Nippon Hoso Kyokai* survey found that 52% of respondents supported increasing the defense budget, while 7% opposed it (IP Defense Forum, 2024).

Although the public majority accepts the general direction of military strengthening, support begins to split when it comes to more offensive policy instruments. In December 2022, a *Nikkei Shimbun* survey found that 55% of respondents supported strengthening the military over the next five years, while *the Asahi Shimbun* reported that 56% of citizens approved of the direction of the three new security documents from 2022 (CSIS, 2023). However, when questions referred to *counter-strike capability*, public support dwindled. According to a *Yomiuri Shimbun* survey, support dropped from 62% to 57% in July 2022. Additionally, public support is divided on the 2% of GDP defense budget for 2023–2027, with 53% in favor and 42% opposed (The Japan News, 2024). This pattern of decline indicates the limits of Japanese public tolerance: while supporting defense modernization, the public rejects direct fiscal burdens and the possession of offensive weaponry.

The decline in public support for these offensive aspects stems directly from strong normative constraints. These constraints are evident in Article 9 of the 1947 Constitution, which remains unamended, and the Three Non-Nuclear Principles (1967), which were not addressed in the three documents released in December 2022, nor advocated by major political parties. Furthermore, although strategic defense terminology has become commonplace in Japanese society, the Kishida administration continues to maintain an official defensive framing in formal documents. Consequently, counter-strike capabilities are framed as a counterattack that is legitimate only if an enemy attack is deemed unavoidable, using the term *hankogeki noryoku*, which indicates that the identity of pacifism remains normatively binding (Hughes, 2024). Furthermore, when the question pertains to Article 9 of the Constitution, public opinion immediately splits. Data from *Kyodo News* in 2024 indicates that 75% of respondents believe constitutional revision is generally necessary, yet 51% support and 46% oppose revising Article 9 of the Constitution (Shibata, 2026). The divergence of opinions regarding Article 9 of the Constitution indicates that Japan's security policy has not yet shifted to a stage of comprehensive change in its primary objectives. Consequently, data asymmetry was identified across the three dimensions of change.

The asymmetry in data findings across these dimensions is reconciled through an analytical framework that examines all variables simultaneously within an integrative matrix. The Hagström and Williamsson Integrative Matrix establishes that the final classification is determined not by a single dimension possessing comprehensive data, but rather by the synchronization patterns among all three, as shown in the following table. Although structured top-down, the table analysis proceeds bottom-up to review the accumulation of changes from the lowest to the highest level.

Table 5. Integrative Matrix

Classification	Capability Dimensions (<i>Capability Change</i>)	Policy Dimension (<i>Policy Change</i>)	Normative Dimension (<i>Normative Change</i>)	Synchronization Results
<i>International Orientation Change</i>	• No possession of nuclear weapons or autonomous offensive fleets.	• The U.S.- Japan alliance is deepened through the	• Public opposition to the reconstruction of Japan's identity as	Not Yet Achieved

	• Development of new capabilities remains limited within the framework of deterrence.	Resolute Dragon 2024 exercise. • No official declaration as a 'military state'. • Article 9 of The Constitution is not formally amended.	a purely military power. • The Three Non-Nuclear Principles remain intact, and the cross party consensus remains solid. • Article 9 remains socially binding.	
<i>Problem/Goal Change</i>	• The defense budget target of 2% The GDP by 2027 is met through accelerated additional funding. • Contract for 400 Tomahawk units with accelerated delivery in 2025, successful testing of the Type 12 SSM Improved in the U.S., and the HVGP project is being tested. • The Nansei Shield military base network in Yonaguni, Miyako, and Ishigaki is operational.	• NSS 2022 defines China as "an unprecedented and the greatest strategic challenge." • NDS 2022 adopts a counter-attack capability doctrine • Implementation of DBP 2022 exceeds the informal target of 1% of GDP and expands the military's scope.	• Public opinion is divided regarding offensive capabilities • Only 51% of the public supports revising Article 9, while 46% oppose it. • The political elite must use the term 'defensive counterattack' to mitigate sociological resistance.	Partially Met

Program Change	• Focus on improving the quality of short-range conventional defense systems.	• NSS 2013 cites China as a "matter of concern" & North Korea remains the primary threat • Reinterpretation of Article 9 (2014) and the Security Act (2015) legalized the right to limited collective self-defense.	• The majority of the public supports general military strengthening and an increase in the defense budget.	Fully Met
Adjustment Change	• Annual defense budget remains below the informal target 1% of GDP.	• Update of Shinzo Abe-era security policy documents without altering the principle of pacifism.	• Gradual public acceptance of JSDF involvement in international peacekeeping missions, non-combat missions.	Fully Met

Source: Compiled by the author based on the results of a three-dimensional

The Integrative Matrix Analysis Model uses four hierarchical classifications from Charles F. Hermann's as axes to measure the degree of a country's foreign policy shift. These four levels operate hierarchically, ranging from Adjustment Change, which alters the quantity of resources to Program Change, which involves new instruments, to Problem/Goal Change which redefines threat priorities and culminating in the highest level on International Orientation Change, which transforms the entire alliance structure and the fundamental direction of policy (Hermann, 1990). In the Integrative Matrix model, this classification is used as a filter to synchronize data on changes across three dimensions, which is changes in capabilities, policy, and domestic norms. In this study, integrating this classification with changes across the three dimensions provides operational indicators for assessing whether a policy transformation is fundamental or merely partial. In this model, a change is deemed fundamental if shifts occur simultaneously across all three dimensions, with each reaching at least the level of Problem/Goal Change (Hagström & Williamsson, 2009). For Japanese policy changes, mapping data into the synchronization table involves filtering empirical evidence across the three dimensions into four hierarchical categories of change. The Adjustment Change and Program Change levels do not include data from Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's era because these two categories represent the historical limits of the old, defensive budget policy. Conversely, data on Kishida's era policies are placed at the Problem/Goal Change level because the policy measures have significantly altered Japan's threat priorities and fundamental defense objectives.

Synchronizing the fundamental classification data at the Adjustment Change and Program Change levels reveals alignment among the three dimensions of change. However, there is a misalignment of data at the Problem/Goal Change classification level. Findings regarding external pressures at the effective border triggered the modernization of Japan's military capabilities, legitimized by changes in policy documents, this trajectory of change is hindered when it comes to domestic pacifist norms. The Capability Change and Policy Change dimensions are mutually reinforcing, but the Normative Change dimension indicates that the majority of the public does not support post-2022 defense policy changes. This pattern of misalignment is categorized as *a* normative lag. From a constructivist perspective, normative lag is explained by the mechanism of internalization lag, in which material transformations and formal policies advance more rapidly than the evolution of domestic sociological norms (García Iommi, 2019). This category indicates a causal disassociation between international systemic pressures and domestic acceptance, wherein border escalations can accelerate material modernization and regulatory changes but fail to alter the public's pacifist identity instantly. Normative lag occurs because the formulation of strategies during Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's era was preceded by changes in military capabilities and policy documents to respond to pressures at the Senkaku Islands border. Meanwhile, normative changes in society are slower because they remain constrained by the pacifist norms enshrined in Article 9 of the Constitution (Hughes, 2024). This change reflects a time lag where material procurement precedes shifts in public perception (Kolmaš, 2020).

Based on the Integrative Matrix principle, the final classification level for this study is Problem/Goal Change with Partial Normative Consolidation. The final classification, categorized as a normative *lag*, specifically refers to Partial Normative Consolidation, which is based on findings that changes in military capabilities and policy are hindered by the still-partial consolidation of societal norms regarding these changes. This condition results in the normative dimension serving as a barrier to change in defense policy. The reason is that society accepts military modernization only when it is framed within a defensive narrative (Hornung, 2024). The misalignment in the normative dimension ultimately indicates that Japan has chosen to remain a peaceful nation that strengthens its deterrence capabilities, rather than fundamentally altering the foundation of its defense policy.

Based on the cross-tabulation in Table 5, the classification of Japan's security transformation under Problem/Goal Change with a status of Partial Normative Consolidation is justified by patterns of asymmetric synchronization across dimensions. When the analysis is interpreted from the bottom up, the data in the Capability and Policy Change dimensions empirically surpass Adjustment Change and Program Change through the redefinition of military doctrine, which is the adoption of counter-strike capabilities and the expansion of the 2% GDP budget target. However, this transformation exhibits normative disintegration in the normative change dimension, indicating a normative lag stemming from domestic opposition to the revision of Article 9 of the Constitution. Furthermore, Table 5 undermines the justification for advancing to the International Orientation Change level because none of the indicators are met, as evidenced by the absence of independent offensive military projections and an increasingly deep reliance on the alliance with the United States. Thus, the Problem/Goal Change classification with partial consolidation represents the highest saturation threshold as the tipping point of Japan's foreign security posture shift within the Integrative Matrix model.

5. CONCLUSION

The transformation of Japan's security policy during the 2012–2024 period in response to the escalation over the Senkaku Islands has achieved a reorganization of priorities at the Problem/Goal Change level. However, it has proceeded only partially due to obstacles to consolidation at the societal level. This situation has resulted in a final Problem/Goal Change outcome with a status of Partial Normative Consolidation. The transformation manifests through the phenomenon of normative lag, wherein the material capability dimension related to the 2% GDP budget target and the formal policy dimension, including the adoption of counter-strike capabilities, have shifted from the previous era. The normative dimension remains a structural buffer due to strong public resistance to revising Article 9 of the Constitution. Consequently, the political elite maintains a defensive framing through the term *senshu-boei* to preserve domestic political stability. This misalignment has implications for the East Asian security debate, demonstrating how domestic normative constraints persist as a structural buffer against external pressure. Using empirical data on the Senkaku Islands escalation as the most likely case study, this research confirms that high-pressure border dynamics do not directly erode the boundaries of pacifism but rather clash with domestic norms, thereby slowing the pace of Japan's militarization.

The study's primary strength lies in its use of a cross paradigm approach via the Integrative Matrix to avoid single perspective analytical bias. Validation of Japan's defense policy transformation is achieved by simultaneously aligning the dimensions of capability (realism), policy (liberalism), and norms (constructivism). However, the analysis's scope remains unilateral, focusing on adjustments to Japan's regulatory framework and internal security posture without examining China's reciprocal responses and operational dynamics during the Senkaku Islands escalation period. Therefore, future research could be conducted through a comparative study using an action-reaction framework to project long-term security stability in the East China Sea region.

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